The Almighty Father
Mark 14:32-42
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

"I believe in God the Father Almighty." I began a sermon on believing in God last Sunday with the story of a young Anglican curate who had asked the Bishop of Oxford for advice about preaching. The eminent Churchman paused for a moment, you will remember, and said, "Preach about God: and preach about twenty minutes." From the beginning of this series of sermons we have thought about the difficulty inherent in the task. By its very nature the act of sermonizing - preaching them and listening to them - is an intellectual exercise. And it is altogether arrogant to presume that participation in the exercise enables us to circumscribe the Almighty. If God is God, that cannot be done. J. Wallace Hamilton, a very popular clergyman of our own generation, wrote: "Pity the poor preacher who has to stand in a pulpit talking to men about God. See the little man with a yard stick trying to measure the horizon." (Who Goes There? p.14).

That is an accurate image of what we are about. To try to understand the dimensions of the horizon with only a yard stick as a measure is to diminish it. The result will be a figure the mind can comprehend, but one which is unrelated to the reality it hopes to describe. So, the first pitfall of sermons about God is that, invariably, they diminish in order to render their subject understandable. We can do our very best: we can pile superlative on top of superlative: we can use our power of logic and reason to its fullest. But the beginning of all honest theology is the humble acknowledgment that even the best effort is doomed to be a kind of magnificent failure. The creature cannot know all there is to the Creator.

And yet the content of our faith does matter. God has given us minds and calls us, we believe, to use them to explore and know and understand what we can. God, we believe, has made us hungry and thirsty for Him. We value the theological enterprise. And so we continue.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty." Words have a way of losing their meaning the more they are used. You have experienced the subtle exercise of repeating one word over and over - "umbrella", for instance - until it is literally bludgeoned into meaninglessness. So, on a larger scale, the repetition of words over the years, seems to strip them of content. The story is told of an ancient Roman religion in which the prayers, which were repeated daily, were understood by no one - because the language in which they were repeated had been dead for three centuries.

Some would come to the same conclusion about the words of the Apostles' Creed. Do they, in fact, carry the freight? Do they say anything? What, after all, do we really mean by "I believe in God the Father Almighty"?

Let me set the issue posed by that affirmation in the context of an experience I had. Many of the Saints of the Faith have had tremendously luminous personal experiences of the reality of God in which they knew the answers. The experiences I remember are the ones in which the questions were put with particular sharpness. In any event, the entire evening is etched indelibly in my memory. Our sons were quite young at the time. As I prepared to leave for an evening meeting I attended to one of the more pleasant duties of parenthood: tucking them in, hearing their prayers and kissing them good night. They had made little prayer books in Church School, and at that point in time an important part of the bedtime ritual was to get the books out and say the nighttime prayer which concluded,"...and God will watch and care for me. Thank you, God. Amen." When life gives us moments of grace like that we find that we can and do believe deeply and passionately.

But as I was parking in front of the building in which the meeting was to be held, in a downtown residential neighborhood we used to call a slum, a little boy, about the same age as my sons, darted out into the street and was struck by a passing car. I watched it happen: I was the first one to him, crumpled, motionless in the unnecessary filth of an urban street, dirty, torn clothing. I saw the two at home: "and God will watch and care for me. Thank you, God." But what about this one, God? Thanks for what? His mother had to be ordered by the police to accompany him to the hospital in the ambulance. I suppose she cared: but mostly she seemed angry. Is God an Almighty Father to well-scrubbed, well-fed, white middle-class boys only? Does He watch and care for them only? What about this boy?

James Smart, in his excellent book, The Creed in Christian Teaching, suggests that the Church has failed miserably at precisely this point. We have taught our children about God's watchfulness, His love and caring: but we have yet to discover the words or the method to prepare them for the fact that there are no measurable guarantees for our theology. Smart suggests that we prepare them only for the "shipwreck of faith" when they first comprehend the reality of tragedy and evil. And he indicts adults for the casual affirmation of an Almighty Father who is, he says, "a sentimental delusion fit only for children who have not yet discovered what kind of place the world is."(p.52)

Let us make a modest attempt at reconstruction. What is it that we are affirming with the words "I believe in God the Father Almighty"?

The idea that Almighty God may be described best with the parental image of fatherhood is peculiarly Christian. It is not altogether logical; it is not ordinarily the conclusion of the person who observes the world for the purpose of constructing a theology. That was the approach of the Greeks and they came up with a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses who acted very much like human beings. The idea of fatherhood is there only as progenitor: a rather common religious idea. The Greek deities were simply an amplified version of humanity. Do you remember the story of Prometheus? Fire had not yet been discovered and without it people were cold and damp and uncomfortable. Prometheus, however, was a sensitive fellow and decided to steal fire from the realm of the gods and make its benefits available to humanity. Zeus became angry and ordered him chained to a rock in the middle of the ocean: vultures were summoned to tear out his liver which would grow back only to be torn out, over and over. So much for constructing a god from what we know about people. The gods of the Greeks quarreled among themselves, were petty, cruel, sometimes generous. For the most part they exhibited "apatheia",a Greek word meaning without passion, withdrawn, uncaring and unfeeling. Like a Royal Family, they were amusing and entertaining but irrelevant.

The Greek philosophers, on the other hand, were drawn to the idea of monotheism. Plato taught that the ultimate reality in the universe was a unity. The ultimate good is single, he taught, but it is no more available to humanity than moving shadows in a cave. God was an abstraction.

It is in our own heritage, the history of Judaism, that the abstraction begins to be concrete. In the Old Testament the word "father" is whispered. "Is he not your father who created you and established you?" (Deuteronomy 32:6) Jeremiah the Prophet wrote, "I am a father to Israel and Ephraim is my first-born."

God, in the Old Testament, is Jahweh; totally other, holy, magnificent, unapproachable at times. His power is that of a potter with a lump of clay. He is father as creator...progenitor. But the Old Testament takes that common idea and

begins to refine and expand it. Being a father in terms of creation implies nothing by way of personal relationship: any more than being a party to the act of conception results automatically in a relationship between father and child. So the Old Testament begins to whisper about a God who not only creates but acts like a parent. And while we have fastened on "fatherhood" as the term for it, "parenthood" is far more accurate. I confess to unease using prayers which address God as "Heavenly Parent"; but that's my problem. The fact is that the emerging idea of God in the scriptures is feminine as well as masculine. Hosea wrote movingly: "When Israel was a child I loved him... it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms...I led them with cords of compassion and the bonds of love...and I bent down to them and fed them." (Hosea 11:1-4). That is a mother talking.

The Old Testament whispers "father" and begins to describe God in the common vocabulary of parenthood. Certainly God is powerful Creator, but there is much more to His fatherhood than that. There is a relationship, a very personal, intimate, nurturing relationship between the Creator and the created: a loving, caring, responsible relationship between father and son - mother and daughter - parent and child. That is distinctly Christian.

We learn that from the One who addressed God as His Father - Jesus Christ. Christians begin with Him, not a philosophic abstraction, but a man who understood Almighty God to be His Father.

Jesus called God Father. He taught His disciples that mode of address for their praying: "Pray like this", he said, "Our Father". But nowhere is His reference to God as Father more instructive nor poignant than in the Garden of Gethsemane. And before we allow the word to fall easily from our lips we need to set the situation there, in the Garden, again. He had been betrayed: the coalition of Pharisees, priests, Sadducees and politicians was, at the moment, looking for Him. He had eaten His last meal with His friends. Very soon He would experience humiliation, failure, pain and death. He said to His dearest friends: "My soul is sorrowful, even to death: remain here and watch." and then, in that terrible, agonizing moment He prayed, "Abba father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt."

That's heavy going. There is something very deep, something primal about that cry that doesn't always come through the text: something I know in my heart more than my mind: something more intimate than any of us is comfortable revealing. The Aramaic word "Abba" isn't even translated. I'm not sure why not because the scholars seem to know what it means. It was the Aramaic word little children used to address their fathers in private, in the family circle. The only English equivalent is "Daddy", and perhaps that's why it isn't translated. Perhaps that brings the abstract notion of Almighty God closer than we want Him to get.

The issue with which we began is sharply and intimately drawn in Gethsemane: the question posed by the little boy hit by a car or by any of the tragedies which punctuate our common life. What we ordinarily mean by "the Father Almighty" is a God who is in control and will protect His children from harm, isn't it? That's the question that haunts us and to which we return again and again.

As you return to it, go by way of Gethsemane. Jesus asked His Father to remove Him from danger: "take this cup from me". And apparently His Father did nothing. But if fatherhood, or parenthood, is the image we mean, there are built-in limitations, aren't there? If a man determines to be a father to his children, he will not be a

dictator: he will not try to make every decision for them. As much as she might like to, a mother knows that she cannot protect and shelter them forever. And in a very real sense the whole task of parenting can be seen as loving, nurturing, supporting and teaching for the sole purpose of one day cutting the strings and granting autonomy and freedom and personhood.

The Almighty Fatherhood of God is not a mechanical power employed to protect all the children from harm. If it were, it would not be accurate to call Him Father. Rather it is a relationship broken by nothing: an intimate love that was with Jesus as He faced His Cross and which accompanies you and me and little boys hit by cars and grown men dying of cancer. When we call God Father we intend the relationship of parenthood as we know it. It is the startling claim that Almighty God, Creator of the universe, weeps when we weep; is wounded when we are, hurt, laughs when we have reason for joy. It is a power more profound than the mechanical arranging of events to shield us from danger. Gethsemane teaches us that.

There is more to it than that, of course. To call God Father is to imply that there are other members of the family. He has other daughters and sons who become our brothers and sisters as we acknowledge His parenthood. That is the great moral imperative behind the event we will celebrate next Sunday - World Communion.

There is one final idea about the Almighty Fatherhood of God without which this sermon would be incomplete. It is that the Father seeks us until He finds us. The great Jewish scholar Montefiore recognized that this was the one altogether new and startling idea that Jesus added to the theology of his people. God is a pursuer: His Almightiness is not mechanical power - but the strength of an eternal love that will never give up on us. He taught it in a parable about a shepherd who does not rest until he has found one lost sheep: or a frantic widow who looks for one lost coin. It is an idea hauntingly present in the magnificent cadences of the 139th Psalm. "Whither shall I go from thy spirit: or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

It is God who is doing the pursuing, even as we regard ourselves as involved in the quest. That can be confessed, not explained. "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew He moved my soul to seek Him seeking me".....is the way an old hymn puts it. And Francis Thompson, in a memorable poem, "The Hound of Heaven"

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years,
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter...
From those strong Feet that followed,
Followed after,
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat - and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet -
'All things betray thee,
Who betrayest me!'"

Those words of Francis Thompson are important to me: I think I have known what they mean. They have been reflected in the lives and experiences of many of us who have spent years in flight, and who know ourselves pursued and on occasion, found, of God.

That's what it means to believe in, trust in, stake our lives on a God whose Fatherhood is Almighty. William Barclay concludes: "We believe in a God whose love for us can never come to an end...it can be hindered, delayed, grieved, disappointed, but in the end it cannot be defeated...some time, in time or eternity, God's love will triumphantly work out its purposes." (The Apostles' Creed for Everyman, p.49).

"We believe in God the Father Almighty."

Amen.

O God of eternity, we try to understand. And we know that we are never closer than when we are given to call You Father. Grant us grace to trust Your love which never fails and to live in the joy and peace of Your presence: Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.